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ABSTRACT

Only a fraction of one percent of elementary school children in the United States are enrolled in the study of a foreign language, yet the United States must compete in a multilingual world market. American educators must reevaluate the means by which they prepare future citizens for productive living in an ever-shrinking global society. Piaget, Lenneberg, Scovel, and many other theorists believe children are linguistically "over the hill" by age 11, that is, by age 11 or 12 a child's best language-learning years may have passed. Time and attention needs to be directed toward earlier language learning, but the prevailing attitude will not change until educators build a new attitude within the language-teaching community that learning a foreign language is not only fun but also plausible within the American school system. The optimum age for beginning second language learning is between four and eight, for the child participates without inhibition in a myriad of language activities that make language meaningful. It takes a lifetime of learning to be truly proficient in another language. Rather than teach the elementary basics of language in secondary school only to find that college-level language work cannot be attained in college, the schools should make the most of the cognitive and attitudinal advantages of the elementary-school child by beginning language instruction early. (MSE)

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IF FORTY IS FOXY AND FIFTY IS NIFTY, HOW COME BY ELEVEN WE'RE OVER THE HILL?

Maureen Regan
October 28, 1985

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If Forty is Foxy and Fifty is Nifty, How Come by Eleven We're Over the Hill?

Never before has our very existence been so inalterably and perilously tied to those whose thoughts, ideas, hopes and dreams, desires, and needs are first expressed in languages other than English. Yet only a fraction of one percent of those upon whom tomorrow depends are enrolled in the study of a language or culture other than our own.[1] Never before has the nation been so feverishly concerned with the conservation of our natural resources; yet it has turned its back on one that is most bountiful: the ability of children not only to learn another language with ease and surprising expertise but to approach such learning without the biases that color their attitudes towards people whose home land and language are unfamiliar. Why does the world's most powerful nation seem the world's most linguistically inadequate? Can a monolingual nation continue to compete in a multilingual market? And what role does the American language learner play in the quest for a more secure and prosperous society?

Recent diplomatic and economic loss of face plus legitimate fears for peace and prosperity have finally combined to give the American public pause. As caretakers of tomorrow's citizens, American educators have had to reevaluate the means by which we prepare these future citizens for productive living in an ever shrinking global society. Major commissions state: "...Indeed, it is precisely because of this nation's responsibilities and opportunities as a major power and as a symbol of ideals to which

many of the world's people aspire that foreign languages, as a key to unlock the mysteries of other customs and cultures, can no longer be viewed as an educational or civic luxury..." (President's Commission, on Foreign Languages and International Studies, 1979)[2] "Achieving proficiency in a foreign language ordinarily requires from four to six years of study and should, therefore, be started in the elementary grades. We believe it is desirable that students achieve such proficiency because study of a foreign language introduces students to non-English-speaking cultures, heightens awareness and comprehension of one's native tongue, and serves the Nation's needs in commerce, diplomacy, defense, and education." (A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform, 1983).[3]

The challenge has been made, the gauntlet laid down. What is our response to be? Return language learning to its rightful place in the American curriculum and ideally to the province of its most natural learner, the elementary school child.

Time and attention is indeed being redirected towards earlier language learning. The word is out, FLES* is in. But the financial flush of the 60's has passed. If the reasons for FLES are more urgent, the lack of funds to support such instruction is more acute. However much our collective hearts are in the right place, our pocketbooks are just as empty. Noble intentions coffers do not fill. Language learning to be sure. Language

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FLES--Foreign Languages in the Elementary School

learning in the grades? Add to an already overloaded curriculum? Hire new teachers? And so in good conscience, our conscientious objectors in residence (school boards, school administrators and other interested monolingual parties) have turned to the experts for answers. What, in fact, do "those who know" say about the relative merits of adult vs child language learning and is what they say relevant to the issues which confront us today?

The Child

Those who espouse the cause of early language learning are buoyed by the abundance of research uncovered during the FLES heyday of the 1960's and 70's which suggests that the child as the "natural" learner of language is indeed the strongest candidate for successful language instruction. While language learning actually begins at birth, the optimum age for beginning second language learning is between ages four and eight when the brain seems to have the greatest plasticity and specialized capacity for acquiring speech (Penfield, Roberts, 1959).[4] This theory is supported by (Lenneberg, 1967)[5] who claims that the ability to transfer language function from one hemisphere to another (plasticity), which is required to learn languages naturally and completely, begins in early childhood and is completed at puberty. Lenneberg further hypothesized that the ability to subconsciously build a new language system deteriorates after adolescence.[6] Research substantiates this in that further studies of children up to the age of puberty who suffer injury to the left hemisphere are able to relocalize linguistic functions to the right (or non-language) brain hemisphere and to relearn language with relatively little impairment (Scovel, 1969)[7]. Any careful

observer of children, be he* parent, researcher or pedagogue, notices children's tremendous interest in communication. They seem verily in the vocabulary business--our most avid collectors of words. A three-year old may be acquiring as many as 400 new words in a six-month period (Gesell and Ilg).[8] She participates without hesitation in a myriad of activities that make language learning meaningful. The child (Guiora et al., 1972b)[9] who seems possessed of a growing, dynamic, flexible ego through the age of puberty, is not threatened by different linguistic systems. Less frightened of making errors, he will take part in the trial and error processes which facilitate eventual fluency.

Piaget describes this lack of inhibition and its positive effect on language learning in his theory of disequilibrum. Equating equilibrium with certainty and resolution; and disequilibrium with doubt and uncertainty, Piaget contends that language interacts with cognition until a final stage of equilibrum is reached. Children are apparently cognitively eager to acquire the language necessary to achieve equilibrium.[10] They appear amazingly tolerant of cognitive ambiguities and indifferent to contraditions. The study of a language contains a great deal of both. They are far less tolerant of ambiguities in meaning, however, and are more highly motivated to communicate efficiently than correctly. It is interesting to note that it is precisely this motivation that distinguishes the child's success in oral proficiency as opposed to the adult's frequent failure to achieve

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* I prefer for purposes of a stronger style to use a singular pronoun. I will alternate gender. Constant double referants are just too cumbersome.

the same goal. To be fair, the child's natural learning environment lends itself to communicative activities, activities which can be more easily replicated in an elementary classroom, than in the site of most adult learning,the highly structured, grammatically focused formal language class.

The child learner of foreign languages learns to pronounce well and good pronunciation fosters good oral comprehension. "Children under ten who experience enough natural communication in the target language nearly always succeed in attaining native like proficiency while those over fifteen rarely do." (Krashen 1982 p. 78)[11] "Almost everyone learns the sound patterns of a language perfectly as a child, and yet, almost no one can learn the sound patterns of a language perfectly as an adult (Scovel, 1969, p. 245).[12] Oyama (1976),[13] who studied a group of Italian males who had lived in the U. S. from 5-18 years and had studied English, found that those who had arrived in the U.S. at the youngest age had the least accent. (The amount of total time in the country did not affect the outcome.) A similar study made by Asher and Garcia (1969)[14] which investigated the arrival age and second language accent in seventy-one Cuban immigrants between the ages of nine and nineteen, concluded that a child who came to America when he was thirteen or older has a small chance of acquiring a near native pronunciation.

We are all in the first half of our first decade busy learning language. As our prime activity, it seems the one for which we are most ideally suited. Faced with an infinite number of utterances based on a finite number of basic structures, we sort out and categorize, digest and analyze what we hear into an

intelligible communicative system. As children, unable to carry a strong tune, throw a long pass or make a life-like drawing, we are nevertheless miniature psycho, socio, neuro linguists who deliberately and in a predictable order internalize complex structures and reissue them to meet our own needs. That we have the gift for first language learning is undeniable. That most of us will be denied the opportunity for second language learning which research confirms is basically the same, is a predictable certainty.

THE ADULT: Nevertheless, the supporter of FLES who gloats over the kind of research offered in defense of young language learners may well, relying on available research alone, get his/her proverbial clock cleaned. The adult* can and indeed does learn other languages and there is an equal body of research to support it. The fact that young children do strikingly better than adults in acquiring a native-like accent has led to the belief that they are equally superior in other aspects of second language learning (Caroll 1960).[15] The adults, however, possess superior cognitive ability which seems to give them the advantage over younger learners in acquiring the rules of second language morphology and syntax. Snow and Hoefnagel-Hohle (1978).[16] Further evidence for adult* prowess exists in a study by Fathman (1975)[17] conducted with 200 children acquiring English as a second language in Washington, D.C..Older children* (11-15) exposed to English the same amount of time as their younger counter parts, (0-10), scored higher on

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* For purposes of this paper the adult learner refers to anyone over puberty.

tests of morphology and syntax. Genesee (1971)[18] notes that" the adolescent's more mature cognitive system with its capacity to abstract, classify and generalize may be better suited for the complex task of second language learning than the unconscious, automatic kind of learning which is thought to be characteristic of young children" (p. 148). It should be noted here that available evidence suggests that "formal operations relate directly to conscious language learning which as we have seen, apparently play a minor role in learning to "speak" a new language" Krashen p. 91.[19] Adults seem better able to talk "about" the language and to use the patterns of their own language in to which they insert vocabulary to permit immediate participation in simple conversation.

On whose facts can we and do we rely? It depends, of course, on what kind of answers we seek, what position we initially hope to support, and what rationale guides our curricular choices. Pressured either by parents, public, or fellow pedagogues to institute a language program in their school districts, administrators, minus the funds and language expertise to do so, must come up with honest and justifiable reasons for their subsequent courses of action. Are they, in fact, cheating American children by denying them the opportunity to profit from their language learning prime? Perhaps, we should get away from the notion of learning fastest and best--best is, at best, an ambiguous term, because research shows that each age group learns different skills at different rates at different levels. Let us

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* For purposes of this paper the adult learner refers to anyone over puberty.

look instead at the task to be accomplished in terms of 1) time on task and 2) meaning to America's next generation.

THE TIME: To be truly proficient in another language requires a lifetime of learning. Regardless of the level of proficiency we hope to obtain, two years of high school French won't provide it. The time frame, two years, is in itself without meaning because it speaks to what Richard Brod of the MLA calls, "fanny applied to chair", rather than to the functional or fluency level acquired. By the age of six, a child has listened to 17,520 hours of language. If he or she has only vocalized two hours per day (a conservative estimate by any standard), the child has produced 2,190 hours worth of utterances. The high school language student, after two years of study, has listened (we hope) to 320 hours of language and used language for 27 hours. The latter is based on ten minutes of speaking in each language class--a figure we know as teachers is unrealistically high. In a 50 minute class of only twenty if each student speaks ten minutes...? To achieve the fluency of a six-year old, the college language student would need 55 years of college instruction listening and 81 years worth of vocalization. (James Asher (1982)[20] It won't compute! Furthermore, we are teaching the 14 year-old to count to 20, when the seven year old can count to 100. We are spending high school time to teach elementary school basics so that college level classes never teach college level content. The beginning language student who is 18 years old, enrolled in "Language 101" is learning to ask and answer questions, count and conjugate, get himself in and out of restaurants and hotels. His elementary school counterpart,

enrolled in "Frills K-6" is also learning to ask and answer questions, count and conjugate, get her/himself in and out of restaurants and hotels with the exception that she/he pronounces it more authentically and enjoys it more thoroughly.

A K-6 sequence allows for seven school years of language experience: vocabulary growth, oral comprehension development, ample time for good listening skills paramount to later oral proficiency, oral and written use of the language, reading, and most important, the storage of a wealth of cultural material that will affect students' attitudes for the rest of their lives. Earlier foreign language instruction provides the learning time that proficiency demands. There are no overnight success stories in language learning. Like the trained athlete or the professional musician the speaker of another language must start young and learn long. Small wonder that as a nation we produce so few linguists of premier quality though the statistics on our need for such people are frightening.* Children bring multiple natural talents to the language classroom: A marvelous gift of mimicry, a lack of inhibition and willingness to participate in those activities which make language learning meaningful, the possession of seemingly unbelievable linguistic abilities make them prime candidates for second language learning. I in no way suggest that the adult cannot learn another language, but rather that the child can. If much has been made of the special abilities children bring to such learning, less has been made of the

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*Such statistics can be found in Paul Simon's, The Tongue-tied American.

time needed to fully develop these abilities to their maximum potential. "Time is of the essence" perhaps takes on a new connotation in this context.

If there is a biological prime time, there is a much more important attitudinal prime time. "From a growing body of literature it seems very clear that negative attitudes can affect success in learning a language. Very young children who are not developed enough cognitively to possess attitudes towards races, cultures, ethnic groups, classes of people and languages are unaffected." (Krashen p. 55)[21] By beginning language instruction in the primary or elementary grades, we not only gain learning time, we gain prejudice prevention time by getting the jump on the formation of attitudes that will keep such learning from being the child's richest academic experience. If some of these negative attitudes are directed towards the learning of other languages, a larger number, I suspect, are directed towards those who speak them.

There exists in the early language classroom an unparalleled opportunity to raise a new generation of Americans. Americans who, living in an increasingly interdependent world, see themselves as integral and important parts of a much larger picture than the communities which surround them. Americans who understand that "willingness to speak the other man's language", in any form, says more about attitude than communication. Americans who are sensitive to and knowledgeable about differences in lifestyles and the linguistic means to express them. If we are not unaware of cultural study as an important facet of language learning--new texts are full of cultural

references -we are still directing our efforts towards groups whose beliefs and attitudes are at least partially and more realistically, totally formed.

Piaget probably little knew or cared about being foxy at forty or nifty at fifty--but he cared considerably about the notion that by eleven or twelve our best language learning years may be behind us. If in other areas we become cognitively more sophisticated, in this one skill area our abilities seem to decrease with age, starting at puberty. Language life does not begin at forty and, if we are to believe the experts, it may not begin best at fourteen either--the time when most public schools begin language programs. Statistics can be manipulated to be sure, but there is sufficient evidence regarding this supposed deficiency to give us pause. I propose not just to make use of this prime time if in fact it does exist, but more importantly to extend the time spent learning a language so as to give the American language learner at least a fighting chance for success.

If, as Piaget, Lenneberg, Scoval and a host of others believe, we are linguistically "over the hill" by eleven, may I suggest that we are probably idealogically equally so? Those who believe in second language learning bemoan the lack of qualified experts to meet the nation's economic, diplomatic and security needs. They point to high attrition rules in high school language courses. (In Indiana alone, 50% of those enrolled in high school Spanish courses do not go on to the second year). Nor are they encouraged by post-secondary language study, which focused on literature, produces an ever narrowing circle of language elite better qualified to deal

with the dead than the living. Could it be that the American high school student has false or incomplete knowledge about the study of language as a whole, and a single year of study in particular? Could he or she have accrued some unrealistic or unreliable notions about languages and those who speak them? Did the sum of their assumptions fail to keep its promise? We can sound the horn, beat the drum, stand on our soapbox until we fall from the effort, but we are not going to change the prevailing attitude towards language learning until we build an attitude from the inside out, from the bottom up, one that says that successful language learning is not only fun but plausible within the American school system.

My hope then, is not so much to alter existing attitudes--a nigh impossible task--but to establish a positive attitude towards language learning in the only learner with whom it is possible; the one who comes to my classroom minus the mindset and preconceived notions that atrophy learning: the child. The child can learn that language learning takes time. The child can learn, by example, that language is integral to and relates to all other parts of the curriculum. The child can learn that he is good at learning languages. And she can do all this before she has learned, from well meaning family, friends, and the American society, just the opposite.

The child's mind represents the clean page on which tomorrow's history may yet be written as we wish to read it. However fabulous we feel at forty, however wise and learned at fifty, we have been filling the pages for a long long time... There is a lot of editing and erasing on our pages not necessary with the child...and then, some of our books are written in stone.

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HELP - HELP - HELP - HELP - HELP - HELP - HELP - HELP - HELP

Next semester I will begin a curriculum dissertation with an emphasis on FLES. I need to examine as many curricula, patterns, plans, designs for FLES as possible. Would you be willing to send me copies of any that you may know about or can get your hands on? Many, many thanks.

Also.....

Attached is a brief questionnaire to be filled out by elementary school principals in your area. The information gathered will be very helpful - again, thank you.

Please send the curriculum and/or questionnaire to the following address:

Maureen Regan
Campus-View 411
Bloomington, IN 47401

A. Please list five elements you would most like to see incorporated in a foreign language program for children.

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

B. Please list five concerns/worries relative to the inclusion of foreign language instruction in the elementary school(s) of your district.

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

If you have any other thoughts about early (ages 5-11) foreign language instruction that you are willing to share, please use the space below or on the back of this page to do so.